

# *Between Times: The Case of Yiddish Transness*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article considers how a literature that travels between languages and cultures challenges dominant narrations of gender variance by undermining a stable sense of time and place. Tracing what I call a temporality “out of sync” in Yiddish-language writer Isaac Bashevis Singer’s short story “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” [“Yentl der Yeshive Bokher”], I contend that his work suspends contemporary medical categorizations of transness: it is through the entanglement of the temporal outlandishness of Yiddish demons with rabbinic as well as early-twentieth century sexological accounts of gender variance that the story disrupts the logic of progress inherent in mid-twentieth-century understandings of the medico-juridical category of “transsexuality.” Reading temporal disjunction and resistance to categorize transness in “Yentl” as a means to question the diagnosability of gender variance in the first place, this perspective configures transness as a space of possibility at the intersections of temporal, linguistic, and geographical migrations.

**I**N A CHAPTER DEDICATED TO “languages” in his study, *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age*, David Damrosch analyzes the stakes and conditions of writing between languages, places, and cultures. Investigating the experience of immigrant and exile authors, he deliberates the “losses and new possibilities of writing as a stranger in a strange language” and explores the challenges of navigating several poetic languages at once.<sup>1</sup> As Damrosch demonstrates, writing in a “strange place” requires both maintaining poetic fluency in one’s own language and rendering one’s embodied experience and knowledge legible in a second language. While Damrosch does not include the case of Yiddish literature in his discussion of writing between languages, places, and cultures, the complexities he describes as informing the

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<sup>1</sup> David Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 182.



experience of immigrant authors—from the anxiety of losing a language to the question of translatability to the refusal of poetic monolingualism—are familiar points of reference to anyone studying North American Yiddish literature in the twentieth century.

The question of how to produce a literature in Yiddish on the shores of the *goldene medine* (the “golden land”)—which, for most Yiddish immigrant writers, turned out to be not so golden after all—was a pressing question that spurred passionate debates within the circles of Yiddish language authors. A vivid exchange of opinions in the early 1940s published in Kadya Molodowsky’s journal *Svive* is demonstrative. One of the writers who famously took part in the disputes on the fate of Yiddish in the United States was Polish-born author Isaac Bashevis Singer. Bashevis had immigrated to New York in 1935, with the help of his brother Israel Joshua Singer. While he had hoped for a flourishing career as a Yiddish writer in the United States, his first decade in the country did not turn out as he had envisioned it. Even though his brother assisted him in securing a job at the Yiddish *Forward*, Bashevis struggled to write during these early years in New York. Registering the decline of spoken Yiddish among Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe and confronting the growing certainty of the Nazi genocide’s near-erasure of the people and world he came from, Bashevis was increasingly concerned about the future of a Yiddish literature. His crisis was spurred by his perception of “Yiddish in America” as a thinned out and corrupted immigrant Yiddish that lacked its original vibrancy and had little in common with the language he wrote in.<sup>2</sup>

Alerting us to both the potential and anxieties that come with the uncertainty of an immigrant experience, Damrosch references a condensation of mental, social, and linguistic structures that author Christine Brooke-Rose evokes when she describes literary exile as

an immense force for liberation, for extra distance, for automatically developing contrasting structures in one’s head, not just syntactic and lexical but social and psychological. It is, in other words, undoubtedly, a leaping forth. But there is a price to pay. The distance can become too great [...]<sup>3</sup>

In the case of Bashevis, these two seemingly oppositional forces inherent in immigrant and exile writing—the potential of holding different and oftentimes contradictory structures in one’s mind on the one hand, and the threat of fundamental loss on the other—appear to be productively bound up with each other. The distance, for him, indeed, “became too great”: in his eyes, the state in which he found the Yiddish of the United States marked a caesura that changed the very preconditions of producing Yiddish literature. The shift of geographical space, for him, deeply compromised the linguistic and cultural coherency which he regarded as the foundation of his fictional work.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, as I argue, the loss of a setting steeped in Yiddishness affected

<sup>2</sup> The title of the essay Bashevis published in *Svive* is “Problemen fun der yidisher proze in Amerike” [“Problems of Yiddish Prose in America”], see Yitskhok Bashevis, “Problemen fun der yidisher proze in Amerike,” in *Svive* 2 (1943): 2–13. English translation: Isaac Bashevis Singer, “Problems of Yiddish Prose in America.” Translated by Robert H. Wolf, in *Prooftexts* 9. No. 1 (1989): 5–12.

<sup>3</sup> Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures*, 185. Damrosch cites from Christine Brooke-Rose, “Exsul,” in *Poetics Today* 17, no. 3 (1996): 299–300. While I don’t follow Brooke-Rose’s description of exile as “liberation” and “a leaping forth” due to its association with positive notions of “progress,” I understand her theorizing of exile writing as producing linguistic, mental, and social “contrasting structures” as helpful and productive to discuss Bashevis’s literature.

<sup>4</sup> While Bashevis’s framing of his immigration as a disruption and potential loss of a cultural and linguistic Yiddish coherency might presuppose a stable “center” for the production of Yiddish writing, Yiddish modernism

other parameters of situatedness and orientation in a productive way: his work challenges readers to hold “contrasting structures” in their heads not only in terms of linguistic differences but also with regard to time and gender.

Through analysis of Bashevis’s famous short story “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy,” I demonstrate how his narrative construction of an imaginative Yiddish universe is anachronistically intertwined with ideas of gender variance dominant in the United States of the 1960s. The narrative entanglement between different times and forms of cultural knowledge—the construction of “contrasting structures”—makes it impossible for the reader to categorize the transness of the story’s main character. Discussing the temporality of “Yentl,” I raise the question of how the “mixed blessings of exile,” as Damrosch puts it—that is, the losses on one hand and the new possibilities on the other produced in immigrant writing—can work to disrupt the universalizing categorization of minoritized experience, in this case specifically trans experience.<sup>5</sup>

### OUT OF SYNC

Bashevis’s “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” centers a character—Yentl—who is introduced as a young woman living in a nineteenth-century Polish shtetl. Yet Yentl, as we learn, is not made for a woman’s life—she lacks aptness in carrying out the tasks expected of women and, as the old father remarks, “has the soul of a man.”<sup>6</sup> After the father’s death, Yentl leaves the home shtetl in order to pursue a dream: finding a Yeshiva and studying the Talmud. In a nearby (fictional) shtetl called Bechev, Yentl, now in masculine clothing, arrives as Anshel, a young man who wishes to join the local Yeshiva. At first, the plan seems to be successful: Anshel becomes a Yeshiva boy, enchanting the whole shtetl with his scholarly skills and all-round pleasantness. The trouble begins when he falls in love with his study partner Avigdor who, along with the rest of the shtetl’s people, is not aware of Anshel’s past as Yentl. When Avigdor gets married to a woman he does not love, Anshel decides to become the husband of Avigdor’s unreachable love-interest Hadass, thereby creating a dynamic triangle of mutual attraction among the three characters.<sup>7</sup>

As time goes by, it becomes increasingly difficult for Anshel to hide his female- interpreted body. During a trip to the city of Lublin, Anshel decides to tell Avigdor the story of how he became Anshel. As a proof, Anshel strips naked in front of Avigdor. When Avigdor, after a moment of shock, suggests a future for the two as married man and woman, Anshel rejects this idea—and decides to not return to the shtetl. While Avigdor comes home to Bechev and delivers Anshel’s divorce papers to Hadass, Anshel is on his way to look for another Yeshiva in a different town, planning to continue his studies. Heartbroken, Avigdor eventually marries equally

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can be understood as always already being produced under the condition of “decentering.” As Chana Kronfeld has shown in *On the Margins of Modernism*, Yiddish modernist writing, especially poetry, “appeared on the international margins of multiple, partially overlapping modernist centers” and “in the absence of any one hegemonic territorial—or ‘colonial’—center.” Kronfeld further suggests that “exile” lies at the very core of Yiddish modernisms: “Yiddish, the quintessential landless language, always has exile and exterritoriality as its normative condition.” See Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 232.

<sup>5</sup> Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures*, 185.

<sup>6</sup> All English quotes of “Yentl” are taken from Isaac Bashevis Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy,” *Commentary* 34, no. 3 (September 1962): 213–24, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/yentl-the-yeshiva-boy-a-story/>.

<sup>7</sup> Anshel’s “masculine” intellectual aptitude is sharply contrasted with the simplemindedness, crudity, and physical unattractiveness of the character of Peshe, Avigdor’s wife. While the “Yentl” story explores the mutability of gender categories, sexist stereotypes are pervasive throughout the narrative.

heartbroken Hadass; both realize that they have deeply fallen in love with Anshel. At the end, we learn that the couple has a boy whom they name Anshel.

Written nearly thirty years after Bashevis's arrival in the United States, "Yentl" is a piece very much between two languages. The text came out in English in 1963 in *Commentary Magazine* before appearing one year later in Yiddish in the journal *Di Goldene Keyt*.<sup>8</sup> The fact that a Yiddish writer published his work first in an English translation and only later in the original Yiddish reflects the situation Bashevis faced in the United States of the 1960s: for most of his audience, the worlds of Eastern European Yiddishkeit that the writer had grown up in were distant, foreign, and oftentimes only remembered across the abyss of the trauma and losses of the Holocaust. After a brief and unsuccessful attempt to write solely for a Yiddish audience, Bashevis came to understand that he had to work with translations to be commercially successful as a writer in the United States.<sup>9</sup> He presented these translations as "second originals" without claiming that they were the same texts.<sup>10</sup> Readers of both English and Yiddish have pointed out considerable disparities between the two versions of Bashevis's work.<sup>11</sup>

In the case of "Yentl," it does indeed make a substantial difference if one reads the text in Yiddish or in English. The Yiddish version, for instance, uses mostly male pronouns and the name "Anshel" for its main character. In the English "second original," while switching between the names of "Yentl" and "Anshel," only female pronouns are used. This narrative strategy, as Anita Norich argues, reminds the reader constantly of the figure's "disguise" instead of creating a narrative perspective that suggests a gendered transition.<sup>12</sup> In this respect, it indeed matters which of the two originals one is able to read—not only linguistically but also culturally. It is, for instance, crucial to understand the concept of *chavrusa*, study partners in the Yeshiva, to recognize how the relationship between Anshel and his friend/lover Avigdor is eroticized by depicting the shared learning experience as an intimate moment of bonding. Pointing to twentieth-century Jewish writers' (re)turn to homosocial spaces as loci of encountering pleasure, Naomi Seidman suggests that Anshel/Yentl's "attraction to Avigdor can hardly be separated from her longing to study Talmud with him."<sup>13</sup> Without the cultural knowledge of the story's Yeshiva setting, nuances of the dynamics between the two figures are lost. Depending on the reader's ability to "translate," both

<sup>8</sup> Isaac Bashevis, "Yentl der yeshive-bokher," *Di goldene keyt*, 46 (1963): 91–110; Singer, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy," 213–24.

<sup>9</sup> Bashevis insisted on authorizing the translations—mostly made by female translators—while using a peculiar technique. The writer would read his own works aloud, translating them word by word into his Yiddish-inflected English, and let his translators find a way to put it into matching language. See the 2014 film *The Muses of Bashevis Singer* by Shaul Betser and Asaf Galay, which also sheds light on the problematic power relations between Bashevis and the female translators. See further, Anita Norich, "Isaac Bashevis Singer: The Translation Problem," in *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought* 44, no. 2 (1995): 208–19.

<sup>10</sup> Saul Noam Zaritt, *Jewish American Writing and World Literature: Maybe to Millions, Maybe to Nobody* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 113. For the notion of "second original," Zaritt references Grace Farrell, *Isaac Bashevis Singer: Conversations* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 51. The idea of translations as "second original" also appears in *The Muses of Bashevis Singer*.

<sup>11</sup> Naomi Seidman, for instance, has shown that the English versions of Bashevis's short stories "Zeidlus der Pope" and "Gimpel the Fool" deliberately omit the anti-Christian polemic of the originals. See Naomi Seidman, *Faithful Renderings: Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 243–75.

<sup>12</sup> See Anita Norich, *Writing in Tongues: Translating Yiddish in the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), 62.

<sup>13</sup> Naomi Seidman, *The Marriage Plot: How Jews Fell in Love with Love, and with Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 291. Seidman reads Anshel's cross-dressing as "a strategy for evading the choreography of bourgeoisie gender relations" (292).

linguistically and culturally, different original texts appear—a fact that Bashevis did not necessarily regard as problematic. But, as I argue, there remains something in this work that escapes translatability. Finding himself between different languages was only one part of Bashevis's struggle: as I have shown, he solved this by declaring the existence of two originals, each fitting the respective context, without suggesting that translation was an enterprise of exact replication in another language. There was, however, another distance that had to be crossed, and that was the gap between times. As I will return to later, this temporal crossing is inextricably entangled with the character's gender variance.

In respect to the distance between times, Bashevis's essay, "Problems of Yiddish Prose in America," published in *Svive* in 1943, is revealing. In the article, Bashevis reflects on his situation as a Yiddish writer in the United States, discussing the stakes of his immigrant writing.<sup>14</sup> As Bashevis notes, the language no longer served all functions of people's daily life. In his perspective, one of the main problems of using Yiddish in America was that there were many objects and phenomena in this "new reality" that could not properly be described in an idiomatic fluency he regarded as genuine to Eastern European Yiddish. What was at stake for Bashevis as a writer is what Saul Zaritt has called "Yiddish totality"; that is, a setting based on Yiddish cultural cohesion and linguistic richness, which allows for playfulness, the use of different registers, idiomatic word-plays, and complex intertextual references—a setting that Bashevis understood as imperative for his vision of realist prose writing.

While Bashevis had regarded the general decline of Yiddish as an issue of concern already before the 1940s, his *Svive* essay, written under the impression of the nearly complete annihilation of the Yiddish-speaking worlds in the Nazi genocide, came with a much more existential urgency. In the face of the loss of a Yiddish "fullness," the problem of "Yiddish in America" was for Bashevis not only a linguistic issue. It had become, first and foremost, a problem of temporality: it is impossible, as he said, "for the Yiddish prose writer to describe the present" due to their "inability to catch up with the times [...]."<sup>15</sup> Confronting the existential threat to the Eastern European Yiddish-speaking population on the one hand and what he perceived as a culturally and linguistically fractured Yiddishness in the United States on the other, Bashevis came to the resolution that Yiddish literature had to be located in the past. But what kind of past?

After his immigration to the United States, Bashevis transitioned from a writer starkly influenced by (nearly mimetic) naturalism and historical realism to a writer of his own specific form of *supernatural* realism. In the 1940s, he started to introduce a demon-narrator in many of his short stories. In general, his work was increasingly populated by otherworldly figures and forces of all sorts, be it imps, dybbuks, or gnomes—creating what David Roskies calls "demonic storytelling."<sup>16</sup> In registering a present that is haunted by a lost past, especially after the Nazi genocide, Bashevis conceived of his own fantastical Yiddishland, one that resembles—but can hardly be mistaken for—the historic world of Eastern European Jewry. The temporal mode of the demons

<sup>14</sup> Bashevis's essay was the first contribution to a much broader debate among Yiddish immigrant writers in the United States at that time. His stance was quite controversial, with Kadya Molodowsky herself prominently rejecting his views of Yiddish in America as a corrupted language. For a detailed discussion see, for instance, Allison Schachter, *Diasporic Modernisms: Hebrew and Yiddish Literature in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 176–77.

<sup>15</sup> Bashevis Singer, "Problems of Yiddish Prose in America," 9.

<sup>16</sup> David Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 293.

which informs many of his stories, as Zaritt notes, is marked by a “timelessness” that effects “a way out of the double bind between a lost past and an impossible present.”<sup>17</sup>

While this is especially true for the short stories produced in the 1940s which feature a demon narrator, the temporal mode of the demons also extends to stories such as “Yentl,” where the possibility of a demonic possession of the main character is repeatedly suggested but never confirmed.<sup>18</sup> In “Yentl,” the logics of demonic time, as I propose, carve out a space for a multi-layered conception of gendered embodiment. Thus, the “strange” temporality of the story—lingering between the impossibility of both the past and the future—is intimately bound up with the character’s gendered embodiment. In “Yentl,” temporality registers in a narrative form that anachronistically blends concepts of gender variance stemming from Jewish text culture with the sexological and popular discourse of Bashevis’s present. By inviting supernatural and mystical possibilities of identification, it ultimately escapes the logic of human time altogether. In this sense, the potential of “holding contrasting structures” simultaneously is most visible in the manipulation and strategic estrangement of temporality—to the effect that we perceive Anshel/Yentl’s gendered embodiment as strangely “out of sync.”<sup>19</sup>

### GOOD TRANS, BAD TRANS

How does the simultaneity of diverse concepts and forms of knowledge about gender play out in the narrative of “Yentl”? The discourse around transness in the United States of the 1950s and early 1960s—the time of the text’s publication—was marked by the sensationalist publicizing of a trans woman named Christine Jorgensen. The story of Jorgensen’s sex reassignment surgery was published on the front page of New York’s *Daily News* in 1952 and substantially informed the public understanding of “transsexuality.”<sup>20</sup> As Emily Skidmore puts it, the press—and to a certain extent Jorgensen herself—constructed Jorgensen as the paradigmatic “good transsexual” in direct opposition to the “bad” “sex deviant.” While the first embodied the values of respectability through the performance of a white, middle-class, domestic, and heterosexual woman, the latter was associated with political subversion and depicted as a threat to the nuclear family.<sup>21</sup> The respectability of the “good transsexual,” writes Skidmore, was advanced by “the subjugation

<sup>17</sup> Zaritt, *Jewish American Writing*, 106. Similarly, Miriam Udel locates a rupture in normative temporality in what she identifies as Yiddish picaresque writing, including Bashevis’s short stories. See Miriam Udel, *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 3–4.

<sup>18</sup> In one instance, for example, we learn that Anshel “iz gezesn a benumener.” While the English version translates “banumener” as “lightheaded,” the Yiddish adjective “banumen” has the double meaning of finding oneself in a state of frightfulness and of being possessed by a demon.

<sup>19</sup> For a conclusive overview of the tension between “progressive” and nonnormative time in the narrativization of transness, see Kadji Amin, “Temporality,” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1–2 (May 1, 2014): 219–22. See also Jack Halberstam’s theorizing of queer temporality as disrupting notions of heteronormative time and space, in J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005). Halberstam, for instance, inquires into both the “anachronism” and the “dislocatedness” in the media representation of Brandon Teena’s transness, framing him as a figure “out of time and out of place” (p. 16).

<sup>20</sup> Jorgensen herself did prefer the term transgender. See Emily Skidmore, “Constructing the ‘Good Transsexual’: Christine Jorgensen, Whiteness, and Heteronormativity in the Mid-Twentieth-Century Press,” *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 270–300.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 271: “White trans women were able to articulate transsexuality as an acceptable subject position through an embodiment of the norms of white womanhood, notably domesticity, respectability, and heterosexuality.”

of other gender variant bodies,” especially non-white bodies.<sup>22</sup> Jorgensen herself harshly rejected being labeled as a cross-dresser or being identified as a (male) homosexual, which were both associated with the figure of the “sex deviant.”<sup>23</sup> At the same time, the terminology around transness was in the process of change and differentiation.<sup>24</sup> Sexologists such as Harry Benjamin defined “transsexuality” as the urge to alter one’s body via surgery and other medical procedures, effecting that the (pathologizing) diagnosis of transsexuality worked along the lines of a distinction between the term “transsexual” (with different grades of transsexual “intensity”) on the one hand and “transvestism” on the other.<sup>25</sup> Benjamin also revived the symbolism of transness as a mismatch between body and soul, crystalized in the symbolism of a soul trapped in the “wrong” body, a concept previously used by Karl Ulrichs and other early sexologists.<sup>26</sup>

In “Yentl,” one of the first things we learn about the character is the father’s statement that his child “has the soul of a man” (in Yiddish, “Yentl du host a neshhome fun a mansbil”), a statement that is repeated later in the story when Yentl’s study partner Avigdor thinks: “She had the soul of a man and the body of a woman.” (“Az er, Anshl, hot dos layb fun an ishe, ober di neshome fun a mansbil.”<sup>27</sup>) The symbolism of the body-mind split, however, does not only connect the text to sexological and popular discourses of the post-war United States but also to traditional Jewish concepts. Ideas around soul wandering and soul switching—*gilgul*—belong to the body of religious and mystical literature that pervades Bashevis’s Yiddish universe. For instance, the *Maggid Meisharim*, a mystical diary dated to 1646 and written by Yosef Caro—famous for compiling the *Shulchan Aruch*—cites an example of a woman who was formerly a man and therefore cannot give birth.<sup>28</sup> The text frames the migration of the soul as a punishment for the intellectual and social stinginess of the former man. Soul switching is also seen as provoking homoerotics, for instance in the case of the effeminate “Edomite Kings” in the *Zohar*.<sup>29</sup> While in the kabbalistic discourse this kind of cross-gendering is often interpreted as negative, accounts of soul-switching extend to such central figures of Jewish tradition as the patriarch Isaac, who is understood to be born with a feminine soul that is only later transformed into a masculine one.<sup>30</sup> In the overlap of different concepts of the body-mind symbolism—modern sexology on the one hand and traditional Jewish text culture on the other—Anshel’s embodiment of gender variance is not necessarily presented as unproblematic. It in fact appears as transgressive, even as potentially violating the biblical prohibition of cross-dressing, but the association of a mismatch between body and

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. This form of respectable transsexuality, as Skidmore argues, was advanced by “the subjugation of other gender variant bodies; as the subject position of the transsexual was sanitized in the mainstream press and rendered visible through whiteness, other forms of gender variance were increasingly made visible through nonwhiteness.”

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>24</sup> This is especially true for the period between 1952 and 1966; see *ibid.*, 272.

<sup>25</sup> In this context, it is important to note that the term “transsexual” can also be used as a positive self-description.

<sup>26</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 111–12.

<sup>27</sup> All Yiddish quotes taken from, “Yentl der Yeshive-Bokher,” in Yitskhok Bashevis, *Mayses fun hintern Oyvvn* (Tel Aviv: Farlag I. L. Peretz, 1971): 131–64. I here quote p. 131 and p. 158.

<sup>28</sup> See *Maggid Meisharim* 8:3.

<sup>29</sup> Elliot Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 387. For another example of interpreting cross-gendered incarnation as a punishment for homosexuality in kabbalistic literature, see chapter 9 in Haim Vital’s sixteenth century work *Sha’ar Hagilgulim*.

<sup>30</sup> Jay Michaelson, “Kabbalah and Queer Theology: Resources and Reservations,” *Theology & Sexuality* 18, no. 1 (2012): 48.

mind with the sphere of Jewish scripture and mysticism complicates the modern sexological diagnosis.<sup>31</sup> Through this narrative construction that simultaneously evokes disparate knowledge around gender variance without a definite identification, readers are not only challenged to hold different structures of understanding in their heads but also must reckon with the story's temporal indeterminacy.

In addition to critically interrogating the body-mind symbolism by refusing to locate it within a definite temporal and epistemic framework, the clear distinction between the categories of the “transsexual” and the “cross-dresser” is challenged in the overlapping of different times and cultural interpretations. While, as we have seen, the differentiation of terminology was crucial for the understanding of transness in the US post-war context, the cross-dressing in “Yentl” escapes this clear divide. At one point the text states:

Bay nakht iz Anshl gelegn bay der almone oyfn bankbet, ober er hot nisht gekent aynshlofn. On a kapote, on hoyzn, iz Anshl vider gevorn Yentl, a kale-meydl vos hot lib a bokher, nor yener iz a khosn mit an anderer. Efsher hob ikh im gedarft antplakn dem emes? Ober Anshl hot shoyn nisht gekont vern keyn meyd, oyskumen on a bes-medresh, on sformim.<sup>32</sup>

At night Anshel lay on her bench at the widow's, unable to sleep. Stripped of gabardine and trousers she was once more Yentl, a girl of marriageable age, in love with a young man who was betrothed to another. Perhaps I should have told him the truth, Anshel thought. But it was too late for that. Anshel could not go back to being a girl, could never again do without books and a study house.

As much as Yentl turns into Anshel by putting on the traditional garments of Jewish men at the beginning of the story, he just as easily transitions back when wearing feminine clothing. Gender is not arbitrary here—Anshel clearly states that he cannot be Yentl again and he later insists that “I’ll live out my time as I am” (“Ikh’l *shoyn* iberkumen di yorn *azoy*”), but clothing at the same time cannot be clearly divorced from gender.<sup>33</sup> Later the text states:

Anshl hot ersht itst banumen far vos di toyre farbot ontsuton dos malbesh fun tsveytn min. nisht bloyz nart men dermit yenem, nor oykh zikh aleyn, a shteyger vi di neshome volt zikh ongekleydt in a fremdn kerper. M’vert vi a tumtem oder an androygenes ...<sup>34</sup>

Only now did Yentl grasp the meaning of the Torah’s prohibition against wearing the clothes of the other sex. By doing so one deceived not only others but also oneself. Even the soul was perplexed, finding itself incarnate in a strange body.

Here, clothes are not only linked to but also equated with gender: as Warren Hoffman notes, there is no difference between a gendered body and the garment one wears as it ultimately shapes perception, both one’s own and that of others.<sup>35</sup> “Vos far an oysterlishn koyekh malbushim

<sup>31</sup> For an overview of the biblical prohibition, its rabbinic discussion, and its relevance to contemporary trans discourses, see Tyson Herberger, “Ancient/Medieval Times, Jews, and Judaism,” in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Trans Studies*, ed. Abbie E. Goldberg and Genny Beemyn (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2012), 36.

<sup>32</sup> Bashevis, “Yentl der Yeshive-Bokher,” 141.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>35</sup> See Warren Hoffmann, *The Passing Game: Queering Jewish American Culture* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 136.



hobn!” (“What a strange power there is in clothing”) thinks Avigdor when, after Anshel tells him he had grown up as Yentl and strips naked as proof, he suddenly perceives Anshel as a man again as soon as his friend is dressed in masculine garments and the two resume their Talmudic discussion. As much as Avigdor now knows that Anshel is Yentl, for him, he remains Anshel, “iz er dokh alts geblibn Anshl.”

The crossing and undermining of conceptions of transness at the time of the story’s emergence indicate the text’s potential to challenge dominant narrations of trans variance. In recent years, the historic formation of modern understandings of transness in the United States has been critically interrogated, bringing forth a crucial body of scholarship in trans studies that makes visible the histories and experiences of trans embodiments beyond hegemonic definitions of transness. Scholars such as C. Riley Snorton and Jules Gill-Peterson, for instance, have provided fundamental insight into the colonial logic of racialization inherent in modern medical trans diagnosis. Snorton and Gill-Peterson have shown that the lived reality of trans people—especially of Black trans people and trans people of color—was much more diverse than the dominant medical-psychiatric categories popularized in Jorgensen’s time could capture.<sup>36</sup> Since the availability of medical services was strongly linked to racial and class privilege as well as to providing the “right story” about one’s gendered experience, many trans lives were lived outside and beyond the categories that allowed for intelligibility.<sup>37</sup> “Yentl,” of course, is a fictional text that cannot provide us with ethnographic knowledge of trans experience either in a nineteenth-century shtetl or in the United States of the 1960s. What strikes us as interesting, however, is the story’s refusal to narrate transness in terms of ideas about transness that were dominant during the time and place of its emergence. Operating in a temporality “out of sync,” “Yentl” rejects trans intelligibility in favor of its own Yiddish terms. While Jorgensen had to make sure to distinguish herself from the “sex deviants” of “homosexuals” and “cross-dressers” in order to become legible as a transsexual woman, the figure of Anshel undermines this clear separation. The story’s temporal indeterminacy not only allows Anshel to easily transition between and traverse the distinction between the “transsexual” and the “transvestite,” it also makes space for the possibility of gay attraction. When likening the pair of Anshel and Avigdor to the biblical figures of David and Jonathan, for instance, the text echoes homoerotic interpretations of the David story. In the Yiddish version of “Yentl,” the suggestion of queer attraction is intensified by using male pronouns for Anshel when depicting Anshel’s and Avigdor’s eroticized bonding—and thus effectively narrating a love story between two men.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Gill-Peterson discusses the “refusal of categorization” by a Black patient she encounters in Hugh Hampton Young’s textbook *Genital Abnormalities* (1937) shortly before the emergence of “transsexuality” as a universalizing medico-juridical category. Gill-Peterson reads the case by way of example as a proleptic disruption of “the racial innocence of transsexuality” she sees at work in transsexuality discourse in mid-century (613). See Jules Gill-Peterson, “Trans of Color Critique before Transsexuality,” in *TSQ (Transgender Studies Quarterly)* 5, no. 4 (2018): 606–20. Snorton’s work on the relation between Blackness and gender mutability traces the historic entanglement of race and gender categories since the mid-nineteenth century. See C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

<sup>37</sup> Telling the “right story” usually entailed presenting oneself in stereotypical “female” or “male” terms and identifying as heterosexual. See Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 337.

<sup>38</sup> Hoffman suggests that, in addition to the same-sex attraction between Anshel and Avigdor, the story also evokes the possibility of lesbian desire between Yentl and Hadass. See Hoffman, *The Passing Game*, 136–37.

## NOT AN ERROR OF NATURE

Another overlap of different concepts of transness rooted in different times concerns the bodily dimension of Anshel's gender variance. In the public discourse around Christine Jorgensen, her case was presented as a pioneering project of scientific possibilities—specifically, as a means to modify the “wrong” body and in that way to “fix an error of nature.”<sup>39</sup> The press had initially presented Jorgensen as being intersex, later relabeled her as a “transvestite,” and only after her surgery was she widely referred to as a “transsexual.”<sup>40</sup> This not only solidified the idea that gender transition followed a progressive timeline but also fed into the cis logic of what a gendered body had to look like in order to be qualified as an “authentic” female or male. Thus, Jorgensen's sex reassignment surgery was not only understood as effecting a “female” body but also presented as an “idealized form of femininity” with “white skin, blond hair, and slender frame,” rendering her embodiment “intelligible as female to readers.”<sup>41</sup>

In “Yentl,” the character of Anshel escapes intelligibility by undermining the expectation of what an authentically gendered body looks like, both in the post-war United States and on the level of the narrative in a nineteenth-century Polish shtetl. Anshel's body is described as “unlike any of the girls in Yanev—tall, thin, bony, with small breasts and narrow hips,” and, as the text states, “[t]here was even a slight down on her upper lip.”<sup>42</sup> The ambiguous body evokes the gender diversity of traditional Jewish text culture: The character's gender could be linked to the *androgynus* (that is, a person who has both “male” and “female” sexual characteristics), *tumtum* (a person whose sexual characteristics are indeterminate or obscured), or *aylonit* (a person who is identified as “female” at birth but later develops “male” characteristics).<sup>43</sup> Importantly, however, the character is never fully identifiable as such, but, as the text states later, Anshel is “like a tumtum or androgenous [my emphasis].”

While Anshel's ambiguousness could be read as stubbornly resisting the panic around the body of the “transsexual” that has to be fitted into a clear and idealized binary to fix “an error of nature,” the text simultaneously points back not only to concepts of Jewish gender variance but also to earlier sexological theories of sexual intermediaries. The latter, a complex system of classification of gendered and sexual embodiment advanced by Magnus Hirschfeld in the early twentieth century, included variations of bodily markers in its assessment of “sexual types” beyond the poles of (cis) male and female.<sup>44</sup> Importantly, Anshel's body remains in a state of “being,” defying the time of scientific technological progress: the character does not need to be inscribed into a discourse of “fixing” to become legible to others, but instead, in every moment, the perception of his gendered self—by others as well as by himself—is what creates reality. The defiance

<sup>39</sup> Christine Jorgensen, *Christine Jorgensen: A Personal Autobiography* (New York: Bantam Books, 1968).

<sup>40</sup> Stryker and Whittle, *Transgender Studies Reader*, 49.

<sup>41</sup> Skidmore, “Constructing the ‘Good Transsexual,’” 275.

<sup>42</sup> “Zi, Yentl, iz geven andersh fun ale shtetishe meydelekh: hoykh, dar, beynik, mit kleyne bristn un shmole hiftn [...] S'iz ir afile gevaksn a pukh iber der aybershter lip.” (Bashevis, “Yentl der Yeshive-Bokher,” 132).

<sup>43</sup> For a conclusive treatment of trans and intersex variants—specifically eunuchs and androgynes—in rabbinic discourse, see Max Strassfeld, *Trans Talmud: Androgynes and Eunuchs in Rabbinic Literature* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022). Strassfeld's work includes an excellent discussion on the limitations of using “gender” and “sex” as theoretical foils for these categories; see pp. 5–7.

<sup>44</sup> Magnus Hirschfeld, *Die Homosexualität des Mannes und des Weibes* [The homosexuality of men and women] (Berlin: Louis Marcus, 1914). Hirschfeld attributes sexual identity to interactions among “Geschlechtsorgane” (sexual organs), “sonstige körperliche Eigenschaften” (other physical traits), “Geschlechtstrieb” (sex drive), and “sonstige seelische Eigenschaften” (other mental traits) in his assessment of sexual intermediaries.

of progressive time is further emphasized by the shtetl community's sense that Anshel does not age—he, for instance, never grows a beard—and rejects having children. Instead of reproduction, the urge to study is what structures the figure's temporality—the story begins with Anshel's wish to join a Yeshiva and ends with him leaving to look for a new one.<sup>45</sup> Thus, Anshel's time is not the linear time of progress but the time of Talmud study: an endless cycle of learning. While the other figures of the story move on and build a family, Anshel's circular time disrupts what Elizabeth Freeman calls chrononormativity, that is, a temporality bound to the logics of heteronormative reproduction.<sup>46</sup>

## MYSTERY

Through the creation of Anshel's own time beyond progress, linearity, and reproduction, and the rejection of a full identification with any historically determinable categorization of gender variance, the story complicates the understanding of gender. Thus, in reading "Yentl," it is impossible to define what gender variance or transness is in the first place. Published in a time that very much focused on scrutinizing and assessing the mind of a trans person and the articulation of the right story of "becoming" in order to diagnose and categorize transness, the story privileges its character's state of "being" over the possibility of diagnosis: Anshel declares that "I will live out my days as I am" with no explanation added.

I have argued that "Yentl" is a work that offers intriguing insights into the narration of Yiddish transness by inscribing a gender variant figure into a story that evades normative temporality. Located in neither a fully historic nor a completely mythic past and at the same time anachronistically reaching into the present of the reader, gender in "Yentl" occurs in impossible time. The stakes for the narrative construction of this complex gendered embodiment are set, as I have shown, by Bashevis's experience of finding himself confronted with the question of how to write Yiddish literature after his migration to the United States. As Damrosch reminds us via Brooke-Rose, there is a "price one has to pay" as an author living and writing across and beyond places, languages, and cultures. There is always a risk of "not arriving," of losing something on the way. But this very real loss that is experienced when one lives and writes across languages, cultures, and, as I have argued, times, can also produce cracks through which we perceive new forms of knowledge from a distance that break up universalizing structures. In "Yentl," Anshel's gendered embodiment cannot be defined because a definite articulation requires a stable temporal framework. So, precisely because something does *not* "arrive," transness works against the progressive narrative of becoming which informs the medico-judicial category of the "transsexual." Instead, transness is located between and beyond times.

This also means that Anshel's gender is a mystery not solved—and maybe unsolvable. When Avigdor returns from the trip to Lublin and arrives in Bechev without Anshel, the community is not used to living with such unexplainable mystery and feverishly tries to make sense of the

<sup>45</sup> To the dismay of Bashevis, Barbra Streisand changed the ending when converting the short story into a film in 1983. In the movie "Yentl," Anshel/Yentl embarks on a ship and emigrates to the United States. For a compelling consideration of the stakes of Streisand turning the material into a film, see Norich, *Writing in Tongues*, 58–65.

<sup>46</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 64. See also Zohar Weiman-Kelman, who has argued that the works of female Jewish poets between the late nineteenth century and the 1980s resist and disrupt heteronormative ideas of reproduction: Zohar Weiman-Kelman, *Queer Expectations: A Genealogy of Jewish Women's Poetry* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2019).

Yeshiva boy's disappearance. There is a lot of talk about possible reasons why Anshel has not come back and has left his wife—he may have converted to Christianity; he may have become a heretic; he may have met another woman—but nothing seems to explain what has happened. Maybe, then, Anshel was “eyner fun di nisht-gute,” that is, a demon, one of those whose time is not translatable but is too elusive to seize and hold. After all, he never went to mikveh, the ritual bath, along with the other men, as though he was hiding physical markers of otherness—everyone knows, of course, that “sheydim hobn hinershe fis,” “ghosts have chicken's feet.”<sup>47</sup> But would a demon have organized a *get*—Jewish divorce papers—for Hadass so that she could marry Avigdor? Probably not, as the shtetl people reason, since demons do not care about the well-being of people. At the end, the enigma of Anshel stubbornly resists resolution.

The Yiddish story of “Yentl,” I have argued, is not only a story about writing between languages but also, surprisingly, a story about the narration of transness in twentieth-century America. The potential of “holding contrasting structures” in “Yentl” lies in producing a strange distance that breaks down universalizing notions of gender. The story's refusal to inscribe itself into the logic of a temporal order that locates the present between the certainty of a past and a future points to conflicting approaches to transness in different times, places, and cultures—with no attempt at reconciliation. Escaping dominant narrations of transness, “Yentl” calls into question the ability to diagnose gender variance and highlights the ideological contingency of terminology that allows for intelligibility in the first place. In this sense, “Yentl” is a story that, by creating its own “Yiddish temporality,” not only refuses to render the gendered embodiment of its character (fully) translatable but also keeps transness open as a space of possibility. A

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<sup>47</sup> Bashevis, “Yentl der Yeshive-Bokher,” 162.